

Self and society in the *Iliad*

Douglas Cairns

Is Homeric society fundamentally individualistic, as some modern accounts present it? If we look carefully at the poems, we can see that such selfish behaviour is marked as wrong; individuals are expected to act in accordance with the common good.

No man is an island

In some of the most influential accounts of Homeric society and ethics, Homeric values are seen as reflecting a fragmented society, dominated by powerful individuals barely restrained by collective loyalties, whose chief obligations are to themselves, then to their families, and then only to a limited extent to others. This is a society in which powerful individuals have a claim to do as they please as long as they remain successful, for only success matters. Above all, it is a competitive society, in which the relative unimportance of co-operation is reflected in the words used to express judgements of people and actions: good men are those who excel in prowess, wealth, and rank, while bad men lack these qualities. The most powerful value terms used to condemn men's actions censure failure, not injustice.

A society rather like this does exist in Homer: its members are fierce and lawless, and they neither plant nor plough, for their crops grow spontaneously. They have no assemblies and no laws; the head of household gives laws to his own family and 'nobody has the slightest interest in what his neighbours decide'. They are contemptuous of Zeus and his laws of hospitality, and indeed of all the gods. They do not even put water in their wine, but eat human flesh washed down with 'unmixed milk'. These are the Cyclopes of *Odyssey* 9.

Cyclopean society defines civilized society by antithesis; and so the *Odyssey's* idea of civilization requires the political institutions of the community, agriculture, involvement with one's neighbours, systems of law and justice that go beyond the family, civilized forms of hospitality, and regard for the rights of outsiders.

The selfish gene(ral)

The importance of the community and its institutions in the Odyssean view is apparent also in the camp of the Achaians in the

Iliad. Like a peace-time city-state, the army holds assemblies to deal with all important issues, and it is in one of these that the dispute erupts between Agamemnon and Achilles over 'prizes' given in recognition of their prowess in battle and prestige within the community. The development of the quarrel, from the issue of prizes to that of the antagonists' respective claims to leadership, indicates that Homeric values are not simple: though Achilles and Agamemnon are both 'good' (indeed each claims to be 'best of the Achaians'), they are so for different reasons, and their 'goodness' cannot be rated on a single scale of value. Neither's claim is endorsed over the other's, and when Nestor intervenes in the quarrel he acknowledges both:

You, great man that you are, yet do not take the girl away but let her be, a prize as the sons of the Achaians gave her first. Nor, son of Peleus, think to match your strength with the king, since never equal with the rest is the portion of honour of the sceptred king to whom Zeus gives magnificence. Even though you are the stronger man, and the mother who bore you was immortal, yet is this man greater who is lord over more than you rule. Son of Atreus, give up your anger; even I entreat you to give over your bitterness against Achilleus, he who stands as a great bulwark of battle over all the Achaians.

Some people think that Nestor's request that Agamemnon should not take Achilles' prize, 'great man that he is', demonstrates that Agamemnon has a claim to take the girl, though Nestor would prefer if he didn't. But what Nestor is saying is that there are limits to the claims of the great and good. In fact Agamemnon himself had already, at a slightly earlier stage of the quarrel, used Nestor's very phrase, 'great man that you are', to express his view of the limits of Achilles' claims. But in any case, ethical argument is not just a matter

of deploying a limited range of words with different degrees of power. Agamemnon's offence in *Iliad* 1 is indicated by his disregard of the assembly's universal view that he should accept Chryses' ransom for the return of his daughter, his failure to recognize that dishonouring a priest of Apollo is also to dishonour the god, and his threat simply to seize Achilles' prize without regard for the normal protocols for distributing such prizes. In the presentation of this behaviour, the important terms are those which emphasize that the distribution of prizes is carried out in the name of the army as a whole, that in proposing to seize Briseis Agamemnon is acting entirely off his own bat. Achilles' observation that 'the sons of the Achaians' gave him Briseis uses no especially 'moral' vocabulary, but it is still a moral argument: a distribution made in the name of the collective should not be unmade at the whim of the king. Agamemnon's disregard of protocol is summed up in the repeated use of the simple word *autos* ('self') in phrases such as 'I'll go and take her myself' or 'he took my prize himself'. These emphasize the illegitimacy of 'just taking for yourself' in a society in which reciprocity – returning like for like – is the norm. It's just that, at this stage, Agamemnon doesn't care about ethics or protocol, but wants to demonstrate his power so that no one will stand up against him again:

I shall take the fair-cheeked Briseis, your prize, I myself going to your shelter, that you may learn well how much greater I am than you, and another man may shrink back from likening himself to me and contending against me.

The tone is different in book 2, though the judgement is the same, when Agamemnon ruefully admits that he 'started it'; this is the notion that Odysseus refers to in book 19 when, as the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon is finally resolved, he observes that the whole thing was the result of the unjust behaviour of the man who 'started it'. This judgement is wholly in tune with the way that the quarrel is presented in book 1.

Retaliation and restraint

The notion of reciprocity that means that

‘starting it’ is wrong also means that retaliation is normally legitimate. Thus the expedition against Troy is presented as legitimate retaliation for the offence of Paris, and there is understanding for the retaliation of Achilles, at least until he refuses what everyone else regards as an appropriate settlement in book 9. The *Iliad*, in fact, has more to say about the non-violent settlement of disputes than the apparently more peaceful and moralistic *Odyssey*: the settlement of a homicide case is a highlight of the ‘city at peace’ depicted on the Shield of Achilles in book 18; Ajax refers to a similar mechanism in condemning Achilles’ refusal to settle in book 9; Diomedes’ silence in the face of an insult from Agamemnon in book 4 contrasts with Achilles’ response in book 1; and disputes during the Funeral Games of Patroclus are settled without violence or loss of face in book 23. Achilles miscalculates (in books 1 and 9) when he thinks that he wants the suffering of his comrades to bring about Agamemnon’s humiliation; the suffering of his comrades, in the person of his best friend, Patroclus, turns out to be something he wishes he’d never asked for; and in the end he settles in book 19 for a face-saving performance in which Agamemnon is permitted to disclaim responsibility for the quarrel and he himself accepts this, even indulging in some face-saving of his own (just as Agamemnon was overcome by the irresistible force of Delusion when he insulted Achilles, so Achilles, he says, would not have become so angry had it not somehow been the will of Zeus that large numbers of his comrades should be killed). Despite the *Iliad*’s violence, and despite the competitive and individualist aspects of its ethics, settlement of disputes without violence and with concern for the face of both parties is an ideal espoused by the characters and apparently vindicated by the thrust of the narrative. If only Achilles had seen this in book 9.

At the same time, society’s ability to restrain the powerful is limited, and people’s defence of their rights in the face of others’ attacks frequently depends on physical force or powerful connexions. Resolution of disputes by third parties depends on the status and attitudes of the disputants and the authority of the arbitrator. Odysseus can roundly admonish Agamemnon for his injustice once the quarrel has been resolved, but in book 1 he says nothing, and Nestor is, by necessity, less forthright in his language. Achilles poses as the defender of the army against the arbitrary exploitation of a ‘people-devouring’ king in book 1; he is therefore disappointed when the assembly keeps its counsel rather than taking his side, to the extent that he implicates the entire force in his retaliation, and it is only when the effects of that retaliation begin to bite that moves are made to appease

him. Achilles himself can intervene in book 23 to remind others that quarrelling is unseemly, but his authority as master of ceremonies is greater in that context than even that of Nestor in his own quarrel with Agamemnon. Homeric values and social institutions work when all act as is expected of them; but no society is perfect, and when rules are broken, the response very much depends on the circumstances and on the character, status, and connexions of the individuals concerned.

Douglas Cairns is Professor of Classics at the University of Edinburgh.